

## OPTIMISTIC VISION OF AN UNTOUCHABLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S NOVEL UNTOUCHABLE

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### ABSTRACT

The story *Untouchable* is a reflection of the society in the mid 1930's where superstitions and illiteracy were riding high. The society was so particular of the caste system and the experiences of a downtrodden outcaste character come to the fore of the reader. Mulk Raj Anand, the author made an effort to bring in best light the psychological, moral, economical and social backwardness of an outcaste. The humiliation and the suppression of the outcaste under the tag of untouchability were brought to the fore. It was just an attempt to show how superstitions and caste system has downplayed with the downtrodden people and suppressed them from all perspectives. The panic experiences of the character Bakha is understood with empathy by Mulk Raj Anand who has come across such kind of experiences in his childhood. He observed quite closely the society and the domination of the caste system on the human beings and distanced fellow human beings under the guise of ugly practice named untouchability. The so called high caste people brushed away the practice in the society.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychological, Moral, Economical and Social Backwardness, Real Life and so his Novel has Main Stream of Social Realism

### INTRODUCTION

**Mulk Raj Anand** (12 December 1905 – 28 September 2004) was an Indian writer in English, notable for his depiction of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. One of the pioneers of Indo-Anglian fiction, he, together with R. K. Narayan, Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao, was one of the first India-based writers in English to gain an international readership.

Born in Peshawar, he studied at Khalsa College, Amritsar, before moving to England where he attended University College London as an undergraduate and later Cambridge University, graduating with a PhD in 1929. During this time he forged friendships with members of the Bloomsbury Group. He spent some time in Geneva, lecturing at the League of Nations' School of Intellectual Cooperation.

Anand's literary career was launched by family tragedy, instigated by the rigidity of the caste system. His first prose essay was a response to the suicide of an aunt, who had been excommunicated by her family for sharing a meal with a Muslim Woman. His first main novel, *Untouchable*, published in 1935, was a chilling exposé of the day-to-day life of a member of India's untouchable caste. It is the story of a single day in the life of Bakha, a toilet-cleaner, who accidentally bumps into a member of a higher caste.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) has commonly been examined in the light of the Hindu caste system in India, and the novel's protagonist Bakha has customarily been treated as a victim of the upper class Hindus for his birth in an untouchable community. Written much earlier to the Second World War and India's independence in 1947,

*Untouchable* still remains popular with present readers due to the never abating caste politics in post-independence India. Hence, most critics gloss the sad plight of Bakha under a “politically correct” perspective to arouse sympathy for the lower caste community, generate a gruelling sense of guilt among the high caste Hindus, and solicit justice for the untouchables from the beneficiaries of the caste system. Intoxicated with empathy for the poor, these commentators blissfully overlook the implicit authorial intention in the novel.

The upper caste people in Bulashah are apathetic, aggressive, intolerant and cruel due to their superior status in society. Everyday Bakha undergoes similar soul-breaking tortures at the hands of the townsfolk who inflict on him severe physical, moral and spiritual injuries while keeping him subject to hunger, humiliation, dirt and deprivation. In the colony, Bakha’s father showers demeaning abuses on him (2, 5, and 68), his younger brother ridicules him for not being favourite with his father (75-76) and his friends mock at him for aping the Englishmen (26-28). In the town, he walks on the dirty footpath fearing the forbidden touch with the upper caste people; gets very little food even after long hours of hard work (66); suffers public humiliation from the high class Hindus (39-42); the temple priest Kali Nath attempts to molest his sister Sohini (52-56); the rich woman flings the bread to him from the top of her house (65), and the babu’s wife hurls insulting reproaches on him for defiling her injured son (106-7). For such abusive treatment, Bakha feels “the most excruciating mental pain he had ever felt in his body” (89). Consequently, he detests his profession of a scavenger and dreams like the camp prisoners of a free life.

Contemptuously, he declares to his father: “,... I won’t go down to the town again. I have done with this job” (70). Soon he symbolically breaks “away from home, his father, his brother, his sister, everyone” (77) and barges on a romantic journey to visit Ram Charan’s sister for the last time on the occasion of her marriage.

Bakha is the “vehicle of a life force” (75) or the “force of that biological expedient in him which, in his race across the stream of life, was sweeping everything out of its course” (74). His outer appearance corroborates his inner strength and steadiness; he looks like a pagan god transcendent of all spiritual ugliness: “His dark face, round and solid and exquisitely well defined, lit with a queer sort of beauty. The toil of the body had built up for him a very fine physique

Bakha searches for a salve to the tragedy of the destiny into which he was born, talking with a Christian missionary, listening to a speech about untouchability by Mahatma Gandhi and a subsequent conversation by two educated Indians, but by the end of the book Anand suggests that it is technology, in the form of the newly introduced flush toilet that may be his saviour by eliminating the need for a caste of toilet cleaners.

This simple book, which captured the puissance of the Punjabi and Hindi idiom in English was widely acclaimed and Anand won the reputation of being India's Charles Dickens. The introduction was written by his friend, E. M. Forster, whom he met while working on T. S. Eliot's magazine *Criterion*. In it Forster writes: "Avoiding rhetoric and circumlocution, it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it"

The story *Untouchable* is a story of a downtrodden character, Bakha in the 1930s. Here Mulk Raj Anand has portrayed the agony of the character in the best possible light. The plight Bakha agonized in a single day was pictured in a convincing way. Throughout the novel we find Bakha envisioning equality and the longing for getting educated was one such example.

Bakha undergoes a kind of severe psychological pain which disturbs him and restricts him and the community from enjoying the common things which other hindu community people enjoy. The untouchables were barred from all the social events and their network was quite limited and the scope got hampered making them suffer poverty for many decades.

Bakha is a child of the twentieth century, and the impact of new influences causes stirrings within him. From a Tommy he has secured a pair of old boots and he wanted to imitate the look of a foreigner. He is a steady and efficient worker:

“Each muscle of his body, hard as rock when it came to play, seemed to shine forth like glass ...” what a dexterous man workman! The onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean.

Cleanliness has to do with soul and not body. This can be proved from the instance of Bakha who has become the victim of the social injustice and caste Hindu.

The barrier of caste hurt him like anything and he questions himself why it happens with them. The kind of humility Sohini meets at the temple and was further blamed of defiling the temple premises was quite shocking. He feels frustrated and disappointed

Bakha has developed a strange kind of fascination towards the western culture that he wanted to be a British tommy and dress like a sahib. He is a hard worker and his talent came to the fore when he met Havildar Charat Singh, a hockey player who promised him that he would present him a hockey stick.

Bakha expresses appreciation for the way justice was provided to the people in the period of Jehangir. Only a pull of rope and justice is guaranteed. He feels himself unfortunate not to have the system of at least approaching the people. He has to plead for his food from door to door and some times got humiliated. The instance where he was cursed by a woman was quite afresh in his mind and she threw the loaf of bread from the multi storied building.

The offer of charat singh to present a new hockey stick has lifted his spirits. So far he experienced the hereditary trait from his forefathers, the weakness of the downtrodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indignant suddenly receiving help. Bakha was grateful for the help of the benefactor.

Even though the cleaning of latrines is not a good job he finds intoxicated in the work. He could get sound sleep after a day long hard work. This shows how dedicated and committed he with his profession and at the same time it reflects the kind of satisfaction he used to get with his work.

But as he got exposed to the tradition of the Britishers, he wanted to follow their fashun. Here we find the paradigm shift ion the nature of Bakha.

Bakha feels the street sweeper's job is easy when compared to cleaning the latrines. The only hope he could pin is on drainage system which most of the Britishers use.

Bakha feels that only a better drainage system can be helpful to remove the tag of untouchable for a scavenger. His optimism was true. People distance him because he cleans the latrines

Sohini, Bakha's sister after being molested in the temple by the priest/Brahmin who cries foul of defiling the temple was the real untouchable because ha has down played the values of a girl and had had a malicious intention in his mind ever since he saw Sohini at the well.

Bakha has always deposited a queer kind of fascination to possess something of the British. He wanted to get a khaki hat which was not used by anybody because they were afraid of a dogma behind it. Bakha brushed away the dogma and wanted to possess the hat which was worn and became dirty. He wanted to get it by using the influence of his father's fame and later came to such an extent that he wanted to steal it.

The transitory joy which Bakha experienced at the fair was a greater one for him. He had great admiration for the

things there. Though he wanted to buy something the caste system has always reminded him of his social status and how downtrodden he is. He buys a sweet which is suitable to his financial level.

There always existed an inner conflict in Bakha. He wanted to be an obedient son to his father and at the same time he wanted to be free from the hereditary work of toilet cleaning, because of which the community of the people is ill treated.

People throw loaves of bread towards him as if he were a dog. When he returns home, he tells his father, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt"

Here Bakha comes to know from his father that not all the people of the society are like the people who he met in the temple and tells him his own experiences when Bakha was seriously ill. The kindness shown by the doctor was an example that people hate them because of their work but not of religion.

M. K. Naik writes about the concluding part of the novel :- "In the end it suggests three alternative solutions to his problem :- a missionary tries to persuade him to embrace Christianity; he listens to Gandhiji who advocates social reform and he also hears of mechanised sanitation, as the only answer possible." „Untouchable“ is a sociological document that focus attention on a number of customs, traditions, social evils etc. of Hindu Society during 1930"s. The Untouchables lived in kutch mud-walled, single-roomed cottage that is used as kitchen, sleeping room, sitting room, and for placing baskets, brooms etc.. There was no proper system of drainage and there was foul smell everywhere. The untouchables were not only poor, ill-fed, ill-clothed but also sick and diseased. Thus, Bakha"s mother died because of lack of treatment, and his father was asthmatic.

The standard of the living of the people was pitiable and they were barred from all the social gatherings.

Bakha happens to meet Colonel Hutchinson, the Salvationist, who convinces him to turn Christian to come out of this socio economic and psychological barrier. There is Mahatma Gandhi who addressing a public meeting which Bakha attends says, "I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on the Hinduism". If he is to be born again, he would prefer to be born as an outcaste, rather than as a member of the so-called higher castes. The untouchable was really the Harijan, man of God. It was satanic to think that anybody was polluted or could pollute another.

This was encouraging and disturbing one for Bakha as he could not figure out how he can be free from the caste system and then he realizes how it happens. It fills a great sense of zeal in him. The flush system is the option which can make the scavengers free from this tag of being untouchable and a casteless society can be established. Bakha feels overwhelmed and wanted to tell the points which Mahatma addressed in the meeting. The day dusks on optimism and a new ray of hope which guides the untouchables as normal human beings.

Mulk raj Anand has displayed a sense of empathy of an untouchable.

The novel ends with the optimism where an untouchable like Bakha has stepped into a dawn of equality and social justice from the downtrodden society.

Anand has shown empathy towards the characters he came across like Bakha, an outcaste society boy and experienced a kind of segregation of one of his family members for marrying a person of other caste. The impact was very much there on Anand and it is reflected in most of his writings.

### In Anand's Own Words

“All the heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories, were dear to me, because they were the reflections of the real people I had known during the my childhood and youth. And I was repaying the debt of gratitude I owed them for much of the inspiration they had given to me to mature in to manhood, when I began to interpret their lives in my writings. They were not mere phantoms..... they were the flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood, and obsessed me in the way in which certain human beings obsess an artist's soul. And I was doing no more than what a writer does when he seeks to interpret the truth from the realities if life. This statement of Anand clarifies that all the heroes of his novels are from real life and so his novel has main stream of social realism.”

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